



# Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

## INSIDE TRACKS

The Newsletter of Region One

Volume 7, No. 1

Winter 1997

## Tough Winter Fosters Concern over Deer Herds

The winter of 1996/97 has entered the record books as the snowiest in history, and everyone is concerned about how the deer and elk herds will fare in northwest Montana. This special edition of "Inside Tracks" focuses on the conditions wintering deer face, deer management objectives in different habitat areas, sources of mortality for deer, and the question of artificial feeding.

### Current Status: Summary of Winter Conditions

Most northwest Montana winter ranges have from 1- 2 feet or more of heavily crusted snow. Deer are yarded up and most travel has been restricted to a few trails used early in the winter. As the crust has formed, deer have been able to stay up on it and their range and feeding opportunities have increased.

Deer have also been attracted to logging operations near winter range where they are feeding on tops and lichens (sometimes called "goat's beard") from fallen trees. Where it is available, deer are using multi-layered forest stands which provide snow intercept.

We have some recent information that indicates deer may be starting to move up slope to feed in tree wells and near rock outcrops where some bare ground is beginning to occur.

Roadside surveys indicate below average fawn/adult ratios of approximately 35 fawns per 100 adult white-tailed deer. That is below what we would expect to see in spring and indicates above average mortality to date.

If conditions persist, we could lose much of the 1996 fawn crop. Pregnant does under extreme food stress may give birth to under weight fawns with a below average chance of survival. As a result, a good portion of the 1997 fawn crop could be lost as well. The loss of two years' production would significantly affect deer populations and hunting opportunity for several years.



*A WHITETAIL FAWN negotiates a trail through deep snow on a winter range northwest of Kalispell. (Photo taken by remote camera in late December.)*

### Other Causes of Mortality

**Predation:** We have data on predation levels from three areas in northwest Montana: the North Fork of the Flathead River, the Murphy Lake-Tally Lake area, and the South Fork of the Flathead. Data indicate that predation is contributing to a decline of elk and white-tailed deer in the North Fork. At Murphy Lake-Tally Lake and in the South Fork, predation levels range from 2-6 percent or less of adult female white-tails and elk, respectively, and should not be affecting populations.

**Cars, Trains, and Dogs:** This year, because of the deep snow and expected overwinter losses, other sources of mortality may be having more of an effect on populations. In several areas of Region One, deer are (Cont. on Page 3)

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**PLEASE HELP YOURSELF**



# To Feed or Not to Feed

The severity of this winter has caused great concern among the public and among Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) wildlife managers. Artificial or supplemental feeding is sometimes discussed as a last resort to help more deer survive the winter. While artificial feeding may help some deer under emergency conditions, there are trade-offs that need to be considered before feeding is initiated.

Some of the consequences of artificial feeding include:

- **Destruction of other vegetation:**

Feeding tends to concentrate deer in a small area. Once the feed is gone, deer will continue to browse on, and severely damage, the native or ornamental vegetation in the area. It may take years for the vegetation to recover. In a residential setting, this could amount to a significant financial loss.

- **Increased predation:**

Artificial feeding will tend to concentrate deer and attract the predators that feed on them, particularly mountain lions. This could increase the rate of predation on already stressed populations. Lions may also pose a threat to other wildlife in the area, livestock, pets and even people.

- **Dependency:**

Once feeding has begun, deer and other big game may become dependent on artificial feed.



*DEER ARE ADAPTED to eating conifer needles and lichen during severe winters. Changes in their diet due to artificial feeding may do more harm than good.*

People who choose to feed need to be aware that the feeding program must continue until spring or a major change in conditions, or it will do more harm than good.

- **Nutrition:**

A diet suddenly enriched by unnatural foods may disrupt the digestive system of animals in poor condition. The microbes in a deer's stomach change slowly during seasonal food changes, but a sudden shift from poor to rich food may cause illness or even death.

- **Disease:**

The opportunity for disease transmission increases with concentration. This would probably not be a significant issue in a one year feeding program, but the risk would increase if an artificial feeding program lasted more than a year.

- **Cost:**

Big game, especially white-tailed or mule deer require high quality forage. The best feed is good alfalfa hay which may cost more than \$100 per ton. Again, once feeding is begun, it should be continued until the weather changes in spring. In other places, artificial feeding programs have cost from \$20 to more than \$100 per individual deer. Artificial feeding would take resources away from other big game management programs like habitat protection that provide long term benefits.

- **Competition with domestic stock:**

Big game acclimated to hay may seek out other haystacks, increasing the amount of game damage. Also, artificial feeding can create competition with farmers and ranchers for hay, which is selling for premium prices.

- **Distribution of wintering animals:**

In northwest Montana, deer and elk winter in small, widely spaced groups. This wide distribution of wintering animals would make it nearly impossible for artificial feeding to reach a large proportion of the herd.

In Idaho, where \$1.50 of each big game tag is dedicated to artificial feeding, officials note that the

overall effect of feeding is "insignificant," with only 5 percent of the total herd being reached even in the worst years. Efforts to reach deer in remote areas could prove futile, and might contribute to mortality because of increased stress caused by human intrusion. In addition, feeding may disrupt deer behavior, including long term traditional movements of deer.

- **Losses will still occur:**

In places where artificial feeding of dispersed deer herds has been done, it has usually not reduced winterkill significantly.

After reviewing the information, some landowners and their neighbors may elect to feed deer in their area. Landowners should keep in mind that the effort will be expensive, that the deer will be drawn to the area for the entire winter (and perhaps longer), and that the effort may still fall short of preventing death of the animals. Feeding may also attract additional deer to an area. If you as a landowner decide to feed big game, please contact FWP for guidelines. FWP has no plans to embark on an active artificial feeding program because of the logistics involved and the aforementioned problems associated with such a program.

According to Wildlife Manager Harvey Nyberg, people can help overwintering deer by doing the following:

- Avoid disturbing or stressing the animals;
- Keep dogs and other pets inside and do not allow them to harass deer;
- Help protect and improve our high quality winter ranges.

For more information:

Please contact Harvey Nyberg, FWP Region One Wildlife Manager, at FWP headquarters in Kalispell (752-5501). FWP can provide more detailed information on any of the concepts covered in this fact sheet. FWP is interested in your views on this subject and in your observations of overwintering conditions in your area.




# Tough Winter Fosters Concern over Deer Herds

(Cont. from Page 1)

concentrated near major highways and the number of road kills appears higher than normal. Because of deep snow, many railroad corridors became deep trenches from which deer and elk had trouble escaping trains. As a result, the number of deer and elk killed by trains appears higher than normal. Finally, household pets are taking their toll. Dogs running at large are killing deer. These three sources of mortality occur at some low level in all years. But this year when we are already expecting above average winter mortality they may become additive and cause populations to drop further.

**Hunting Harvest:** The 1996 Hunting Season included a new provision allowing the harvest of antlerless white-tailed deer during the last week of the general season. Because of the severe snow conditions during that week, hunters and deer were concentrated in or near low elevation winter ranges. Hunter distribution was further restricted because many roads normally open were blocked by deep snow. In those areas where hunters had access to high density wintering populations, high harvest occurred. Fortunately, these situations did not occur across the region, but were fairly local. Therefore, we will not know the

effects of the high harvest observed during the last week until our harvest survey is complete in June.

Check station data indicate that hunters weren't selective during the last week. We operated 6 hunter check stations and checked 1,013 white-tailed deer including 552 does, 186 fawns and 275 bucks. The number of bucks checked was less than normal, indicating that some hunters selected a doe rather than wait for a buck. The antler point distribution for whitetail bucks taken during the last week showed that three-fourths had three or fewer antler points per side. 

## Feeding Recommendations

### If You Decide to Feed...

FWP does not encourage the public to begin artificial feeding programs for big game. Before you decide whether to feed big game, please see the article on the preceding page concerning the consequences of feeding programs; also, contact a local department biologist or warden for more information. If you then decide to begin a feeding program, the following guidelines should be followed.

#### WHERE TO FEED:

Feeding programs should be conducted on private land in rural, not suburban, areas only. Because deer or elk attracted by feeding will damage both native and ornamental vegetation and haystacks, all neighbors will have to be consulted and agree to the feeding program. Pets should not be allowed to roam because of the potential for harassment or direct killing of big game. Any additional stress placed on big game will add to the mortality that may already occur.

#### WHEN TO FEED:

Feeding should begin before animal condition deteriorates. It takes time and energy for big game ruminants to adapt to a dramatic change in forage. Feeding programs that begin after animals are obviously in poor condition will not be effective.


#### HOW TO FEED:

Feed should be placed near cover and away from homes and buildings. If pelletized rations or grain are fed, they should be placed in bins to reduce waste.

#### WHAT TO FEED:

1) High quality alfalfa hay. This is the best feed to give because it provides adequate quality and the volume of roughage needed to simulate a natural diet. A mature deer will consume about 6-8 pounds of air dried forage per day. Therefore, if a pelletized ration or grain supplement is given, the deer will need other forage to fill the gut. Deer will continue to browse on other native or ornamental vegetation even after the hay is consumed. (Est cost: \$150/ton if available).

2) Pelletized deer ration. One to two pounds per animal would be placed in a bin to avoid spillage and wastage. This would have to be supplemented with poor quality alfalfa hay, grass hay or straw to fill the gut. As before, deer will also browse on natural and ornamental feeds in the area. (Available at Equity for about \$220/ton)

3) Three way grain. This is a high energy feed, but again, only 1-2 pounds per animal would be placed each day. It would be supplemented with hay or straw. Deer would also browse on natural or ornamental vegetation in the feeding area. (Equity \$200/ton) 



# Citizens Advisory Members Voice Opinions on Winter Feeding of Wild Game

The Citizen Advisors for FWP in northwest Montana provide comments, suggestions and guidance on management of fish, wildlife, and parks resources. Recently, the advisors discussed with FWP the issue of artificial feeding of deer during the current harsh winter. Their comments illustrate the cross-section of public views across the region regarding this difficult issue.

Bruce Babcock, Kalispell: "I have mixed emotions about this issue. I wouldn't want to see FWP get involved directly in supplemental feeding, but I would like to see them support private people who want to feed. This



winter is a rare case. In a way, humans are responsible for the high numbers of deer and they want to try to do something to help." (H. 752-0789. W. 752-4504)

Theresa Conner, Columbia Falls: "It's hard to watch deer starve, but this is not inhumane. Some people call hunting inhumane. There's beautiful parts of nature and there's ugly parts; winter kill

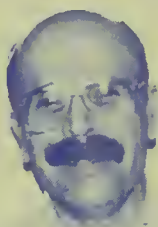


is one of the ugly parts. I have 25 deer around my yard and I don't have the money to feed them all. If you start feeding deer, then cut them off, it's worse than not feeding." (892-5439)

Steve Hawkins, Eureka: "It's easy to talk about feeding deer, but logistically, you can't do it in northwest Montana. If you want to feed your "pet deer" around your house, it's up to you. More money should go to picking up more habitat and winter range; that will make a greater difference in the long run." (296-2642)



Warren Illi, Kalispell: "FWP feeds millions of fish in the hatchery system and people see that benefit the fishery. I realize that a deer feeding program could only reach a small percentage of the herd, but at least



it would be perceived as trying to help deer hunting and viewing. I don't support artificial feeding on a routine basis, but in an extreme winter I do. I could go out and get volunteers to move 1,000 starving elk from Yellowstone up to northwest Montana. People like to help wildlife." (257-5703)

Bill Kemp, Libby: "Deer feeding should be a personal preference; I don't think public dollars should be used. I support individuals who want to feed deer in their area." (293-8109)



Brent Mitchell, Kalispell: "The Boards of Flathead Wildlife, Inc. and Flathead Audubon both voted against an artificial deer feeding program. I'd rather see public funds used to se-



cure more habitat and winter range. Studies on the feeding of wildlife have been done since the 1920s and 30s. Over and over it has been shown that only a small percentage of the population benefits, that the feeding has an insignificant effect on the population as a whole, and that artificial feeding is extremely expensive. Some conditions are set by nature, not by man." (756-8130)

Ben Rosetto, Kalispell: FWP should stay out of supplemental game feeding as a matter of policy. People are concerned with animals they see around the valley; that's just human nature. FWP should



act as an advisor to individuals who want to feed deer, but a large scale feeding program would be futile. In other states, feeding programs are in place for herds which have been completely cut out of winter ranges. Fortunately, that hasn't happened here." (756-7406)

Rob Shrider, Ronan: "I support supplemental feeding in some areas where habitat and winter ranges have been reduced by development. In certain areas deer and elk damage ranchers'



haystacks; in those areas, feed could be provided away from the haystacks for the deer and elk. Public donations could be used for such a feeding program." (676-3701)

Michael Ware, Kalispell: "This issue affects how people view FWP, and I believe people see the agency as being unresponsive on the question of feeding deer. I think people would see feeding as an acceptable use of hunting license dollars. FWP should sanction it." (756-6416)



Not Pictured:

Craig Phillips, Thompson Falls (827-3702)

Dale Sommerfield, Kalispell - new member - (752-5377)



## CAC Celebrates First Anniversary

The eleven members of the Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) celebrated the beginning of the group's second year as they attended the sixth CAC meeting with members of the Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks staff last week.

Since December of 1995, the group has explored and provided advice on many timely issues ranging from the setting of hunting seasons to Department attitude at enforcement check stations, predator-prey relationships, and recently, artificial feeding of wildlife.

Meetings in the immediate future will focus on Fisheries issues - kokanee/lake trout interactions in Flathead Lake, bull trout recovery, and the fishing regulation setting process.

One of the major jobs of each CAC member is to gather and share opinions about FWP programs from people in communities in which they live. It is up to each Advisor as to how they



*CELEBRATING. Region One Supervisor celebrates a winter fishing catch as well as the first anniversary of the Citizen's Advisory Committee. The Committee has worked with FWP to provide advice on many issues during the year.*

accomplish this. Some obtain information at group or organization meetings. Still others seek opinions at their places of business. One member advertised and held small informational meetings. Whatever method used, we at FWP appreciate the openness and

effective communication established with the CAC.

Some of the advice given to us to date has been (gulp) critical, some supportive, but all timely and useful.

As we begin this new year, I urge you to get to know your CAC, and let them know what you think about your Fish, Wildlife & Parks issues. 🐾



### COMMISSIONER'S COLUMN

## Hunting Season is Over...Whew!!!!!!

The 1996 hunting season is over, thank goodness!! It will be a while before all the data is in, but my gut feeling is that we may have to tweak a few things before the 1997 season.

Last fall provided plenty of tracking snow. Unfortunately, tracking an animal more than a few hundred yards through deep snow was enough to wear out most people. So hunters used the few plowed roads, concentrating the harvest somewhat.

What disturbed me most was hunter behavior. Somehow some hunters' brains go into neutral when sighting game. They shoot from roads, over railroad tracks, out pickup windows, off highways, and so on. Maybe this goes on every year, but was more apparent this year because the hunting

was concentrated in a smaller area. Whatever the reason, it wasn't good.

The future of hunting is in the sportsmen's hands. How we act dictates how anti-hunters react. I hope that next year (and in the future) every hunter remembers that before pulling the trigger.

We learned a few things in 1996. We are going to take a hard look at B-tags. Their number will probably need to be reduced. Over the counter B-tags may be capped at a certain number. Hunters need to read the regulations. Some were found several miles from where their B-tags were legal. Pay attention!

In 1996, mule deer and elk harvest was down, so carry-over should be pretty good, depending on winter kill.

The heavy harvest of white-tail in 1996 might not be all bad, considering the amount of snow this winter. I prefer venison in the freezer to feeding ravens.

Seems like there are still plenty of mountain lions out there, so we may bump the quotas a little. We will have a better handle on the situation when we look at how fast quotas were filled and where lions were harvested.

On a positive note, I have been working in the Fisher River area. The day after hunting season, I saw 18 does, 11 the next day and usually see between 10 and 25 does every day. So there are a few left.

Have a great 1997!

Your commissioner,  
Charlie Decker



# Habitat Conditions and Objectives Developed

Region One's wildlife staff have developed "draft" management objectives for white-tailed deer and mule deer in northwest Montana habitats. We welcome your comments and suggestions on these objectives

## HABITAT CONDITIONS AND OBJECTIVES: WHITE-TAILED DEER

**Suburban Habitat** includes agricultural valley bottoms where human development is concentrated. These areas often support relatively high densities of deer on a yearlong basis. Game damage is common and includes damage to standing and stored crops as well as gardens and ornamental plants. Road kills are common because these habitats often contain main highways. The population objective is to maintain white-tailed deer numbers within the range of tolerance for game damage and associated effects. In this habitat our objective is to provide landowners the range of management tools they need to manage white-tailed deer within their property. Hunters would have the opportunity to harvest both male and female deer.

**Montane Forest Habitat** includes forested mountains and valleys in most of Region One. This habitat offers a wide variety of management and recreational options based on access and land management intensity. Hunting opportunities vary from lightly roaded to heavily roaded situations. This habitat provides the bulk of general hunting opportunity. Within this area, hunters can select hunting situations that provide the hunting opportunity they desire. Populations are expected to fluctuate within the broad limits allowed by weather and habitat quality. Hunting opportunity is as liberal as possible. Our goal is for at least 50 percent of the bucks harvested to have 4 or more points per side with a diverse age structure.

**Backcountry habitat** includes the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. This area has historically been mule deer habitat. Our goal is to limit the encroachment of white-tailed deer. Seasons would be very liberal and encourage the harvest of both male and female whitetails.

## HABITAT CONDITIONS AND OBJECTIVES: MULE DEER

**The Montane Forest** is our general mule deer hunting area. Mule deer densities vary widely based on habitat quality and land use intensity. Muleys generally occur as small bands scattered across the landscape in suitable areas. In this habitat, our objective is to provide the opportunity to harvest both male and female deer in as liberal a season format as possible. Harvest would generally be light with at least 40 percent of bucks having at least 4 points on a side.

**The High Elevation Isolated Mountain Ranges** include areas generally at or above timberline in areas with very limited road access. This habitat provides the opportunity to hunt for mule deer in a rugged, backcountry situation with the chance of seeing and perhaps harvesting older aged bucks. These habitats are generally very limited in area because of the unique topography and geology they represent. Hunters would expect to hike long distances in rugged terrain while seeing few other hunters. In this habitat, we allow mule deer numbers to fluctuate within the limits imposed by weather and habitat. At least 50-60 percent of the bucks taken would have at least 4 points per side. 🦌



*MONTANE FORESTS are the general mule deer hunting areas. Region One's objective in these areas is to provide the opportunity to harvest male and female deer in as liberal a season format as possible.*





Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks



# M•A•Y Club

## Montana•Angling•Youth

- Ages — preschool through elementary!
- No meetings to attend, just get great stuff by mail!
- Receive fun newsletters at your home filled with information, tips, games!
- Write to us and share ideas with kids across Montana who like the outdoors and fishing!
- Get cool fishing tackle and outdoor items you can use right away!
- Learn about fishing and the water environment!



**Ask a friend to join the M•A•Y Club, too!**

### Teachers' note:

Please copy and distribute this form to your students, then collect completed forms from interested students and return them to MFWP; or students may take the forms home and mail them in.

**Thanks!**

## It's Free!

Mail or drop off form to:

Montana•Angling•Youth Club  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
490 North Meridian Road  
Kalispell, MT 59901

### Registration Form

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
Town \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

# Montana Begins Youth Fishing Club

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is looking for kids (preschool through elementary) to join the Montana Angling Youth Club (M.A.Y. Club). The M.A.Y. Club is patterned after the successful Pennsylvania League of Angling Youth which boasts tens of thousands of members. The M.A.Y. Club is part of Montana's new Family Fishing Initiative.

The M.A.Y. Club program is being piloted in Northwest Montana; kids from Judy Sander's fourth grade class at Evergreen Elementary School are helping write the first newsletter edition. Local fishing and conservation clubs are helping to fund the program. The aim of the program is to introduce youngsters to fish biology, fishing techniques, ethics, and conservation of the aquatic environment.

For more information on the program, see the accompanying registration form or call FWP at 752-5501. To register, complete a registration form and mail to FWP or drop off the form at the FWP office in Kalispell.

## National 'Hooked on Fishing' Program Comes to Montana

The highly successful "Hooked on Fishing, Not on Drugs" program is being piloted in three Montana schools: Evergreen, Sheridan, and Havre.

The program emphasizes life skills in math, science, language and art, all from a perspective of fishing and the aquatic environment.

At Evergreen Elementary, Judy Sander's fourth grade students have studied aquatic insects, fishing ethics and techniques, and fish biology. The students have written parts of a youth newsletter on fishing, and they've taken part in several fishing trips to Flathead area lakes.



**KIDS AND FISH.** Members of Judy Sander's Fourth Grade "Hooked on Fishing" class show off a lake trout caught on a recent ice fishing trip to Flathead Lake.

**VIDEO**

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# Agencies, Burlington Northern, Others Cooperate in Wildlife Program

A cooperative effort involving Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), state and federal agencies, private conservation groups, and individuals has produced benefits for wildlife in north-west Montana. The Burlington Northern Environmental Stewardship Area program (BNESA) seeks to conserve wildlife and wildlife habitat in the Middle Fork Flathead River drainage including the railroad tracks and U.S. Highway 2 corridors.

Grizzly Bear Management Specialist Tim Manley of FWP has worked with BNSF employees, other cooperators, and area residents to reduce grizzly bear deaths in the area and to keep grizzly bear/human conflicts to a minimum. BNSF and the other agencies have supplied funding and personnel support for the efforts.

At a recent BNESA meeting, Randy Wolff of BNSF presented to the Flathead Land Trust's Don Murray a

\$50,000 check from Burlington Northern Foundation. The money has been placed into the BNESA Stewardship



**SUPERVISOR'S AWARD.** FWP Grizzly Bear Management Specialist Tim Manley accepts the annual Supervisor's Award from Region One Supervisor Dan Vincent. Manley was recognized for his outstanding work to reduce grizzly/human conflicts in the BNESA Corridor and in other areas of northwest Montana.

Account with the Flathead Land Trust. BNESA and the Land Trust recently merged and have a shared interest in the future of the Middle Fork Corridor.

The account is designed to reach a level where the interest can be applied to wildlife conservation projects in the corridor.



**STEWARDSHIP CHECK.** Randy Wolff of Burlington Northern Santa Fe presents a check for \$50,000 to Flathead Land Trust's Don Murray for the BNESA Stewardship Account.



For more information on Fish, Wildlife & Parks issues, listen to:  
**"Northwest Outdoors,"**  
 FWP's weekly radio show, Thursdays at 8:35 a.m.  
 on KGEZ, 600 AM.

**INSIDE TRACKS** is published by Region One



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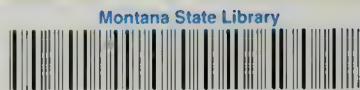
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